

FIELD



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CONTENTS

	5	Theodore Roethke: A Symposium
Marianne Boruch	10	"Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz": Three Spirits
Thomas Lux	14	"The Lost Son": The Secret Joinery of Song
Alberta Turner	20	"The Waking": A Second Reading
Martha Collins	24	Word-Work
Gerald Stern	28	"The Chums": More Major
Beckian Fritz Goldberg	32	The Case of "The Tree, the Bird"
	* * *	
Lynne McMahon	41	In Summer
Peter Johnson	49	Pretty Happy
Ellen Doré Watson	50	Funny How
	52	$E=mc^2$
Michael Chitwood	53	The Shop
	54	What to Expect
	55	Past Due
Franz Wright	56	Child Rearing
	57	Autobiography
	58	First Light
	59	First Day on the Ward
Sharon Olds	60	A Chair by the Fire
	62	Lifelong
	63	The Foetus in the Voting Booth
Kathleen Peirce	64	His and Hers
	65	Expulsion and Annunciation
	66	Blessing the Throat
	67	Person, Place, Gesture, Thing
	69	Wren

<i>Jean Valentine</i>	70	<i>The Baby Rabbits in the Garden</i>
<i>Meir Wieseltier</i>	71	<i>Thin Livestock</i>
	72	<i>The Fowl of the Air</i>
	73	<i>Window to the Future</i>
<i>Charles Simic</i>	74	<i>Poor Little Devil</i>
	75	<i>Free the Goldfish</i>
<i>John McKernan</i>	76	<i>Planting Red Maple Saplings</i>
<i>Sandra McPherson</i>	77	<i>Precious Metal</i>
<i>Dennis Schmitz</i>	80	<i>Dances</i>
	82	<i>Crabgrass</i>
<i>Karl Krolow</i>	83	<i>Under a Spell</i>
	84	<i>July</i>
	85	<i>Almost Nothing</i>
<i>Stanley Plumly</i>	86	<i>Keats in Burns Country</i>
<i>Michele Glazier</i>	88	<i>Tourist</i>
<i>Charles Wright</i>	90	<i>Lives of the Artists</i>
	95	<i>Contributors</i>

THEODORE ROETHKE

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM

THEODORE ROETHKE: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

One hears Roethke's name very seldom these days. He seems to be undergoing the kind of innocuous neglect that follows writers who have, in their lifetime and immediately after, been recognized as major figures. The trough that seems to follow such fame may be inevitable, but we think it is time to begin rescuing Roethke from his gradual obliteration in the fitful memory of American letters. Like Elizabeth Bishop, whose star rightly shines among the brightest these days, and like Robert Lowell, whose accomplishment and career continue to interest readers, critics, and students of contemporary poetry, Roethke is a presence to be reckoned with, one of those artists without whose achievement it would be difficult to see the current American scene as being anything like the same. Visual artists get enshrined in museums; Jackson Pollock, with whom Roethke shares a great deal as to period, innovation, and sheer accomplishment, is safely canonized by the prices his works fetch and the loving attention afforded by exhibitions and historical scholarship. A poet's accomplishment and memorialization are somewhat more precarious. Roethke will live on, if he does, because individual readers and writers cherish his poems and pass their enthusiasm on to others. Hence this modest beginning of a rereading of this important figure.

I mean to be personal and anecdotal here for a moment. When I was an undergraduate in Minnesota I happened to pick up a new anthology (*Fifteen Modern American Poets*, edited by George P. Elliott, 1956). Lowell was there, whom I knew and found fascinating, and Wilbur, whom I much admired, and Bishop and Jarrell, whom I had not read but would soon come to cherish greatly. But the poems that really lifted the lid and stirred the pot, that felt especially new, especially different, felt dangerously and wildly original, were the Roethke poems from his second volume, *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. Who in the world was this poet? How did you pronounce his name? What did he think he was doing? There it was, right on the page, and you had to see what you could make of it:

Believe me, knot of gristle, I bleed like a tree;
I dream of nothing but boards;
I could love a duck.

Such music in a skin!
A bird sings in the bush of your bones.
Tufty, the water's loose.
Bring me a finger. This dirt's lonesome for grass.
Are the rats dancing? The cats are.
And you, cat after great milk and vasty fishes,
A moon loosened from a stag's eye,
Twiced me nicely, —
In the green of my sleep,
In the green.

("Give Way, Ye Gates")

It was not referential in the way that people expected poetry to be. It was highly musical, highly associative, and it reconfigured the poetic scene in the sense that it very much broadened what a poet could consider doing. If there's an analogy to abstract expressionism and the energies and originalities it sponsored and released, then surely Roethke's accomplishment in these poems was huge and unforgettable.

As time went on and I began reading this poet regularly, I found there were other Roethkes. There was the witty and sophisticated composer of love poems like "I Knew A Woman," which I promptly memorized when I found it. And there was a formally mystical Roethke, an autobiographical Roethke, a Roethke who made himself the poet of the environment. Maybe the sheer variety of this poet's accomplishment, along with a certain unevenness, with lapses and predictabilities, has made him harder to categorize and therefore harder to keep in memory.

These essays reflect that. They show poets going to Roethke for quite different things, preferring now this side of him, now that. They show a measured response, in which preferences are sifted out from reservations in order to identify and possess what's most important. Readers will, we think, find them useful, both

for discoveries and for rediscoveries and, most of all, for their own projects of finding and keeping what is truly valuable in this poet.

There is evidence that that process is occurring all around us. In these pages last spring, in an interview, Charles Wright found himself saying: "Roethke doesn't really interest me that much until his last book, *The Far Field*. And what interests me there is, of course, 'North American Sequence,' still an unacknowledged American masterpiece. . . . I like how he talks about the invisible world as well as the visible one. . . . I feel a kinship with these six poems, unlike any other contemporary poems I know. They are, you might say, singing my song, and I hear it." If you are a reader of Wright you recognize the truth of these statements and you see one important way that Roethke is still among us, his accomplishment still reverberating in the direction and work of a younger contemporary.

I heard Roethke read once, at Wesleyan, around 1959. I felt that the man I saw confirmed the work. He was reading with Stanley Kunitz, and he began by reciting a Kunitz lyric he loved and knew by heart. There was the generosity of spirit, everywhere evident in the poems. Then he read his own poems, again often without having to refer to the text on the page, knowing them almost by heart, and he read with great feeling and musicality. There was the famous ear, the lyric capacity that could take something overly musical, like so much of Dylan Thomas, and make it authentic and make it American. A big man, he often rose on his toes and waved his hands with the grace of a dancer. That too, confirmed the work, its combining of size and strength with an astonishing delicacy and grace. When I saw the film made later on in his life, "In a Dark Time," all these impressions were confirmed. I'm glad I saw him in person; I'm glad we have the film. Like Charles Wright, I loved the poems of the last volume and the new direction they point. When Roethke died, John Berryman said in a dream-song elegy, "The garden-master's gone." Yes, as a person. But not, I think, as a presence.

David Young

FRAU BAUMAN, FRAU SCHMIDT, AND FRAU SCHWARTZE

Gone the three ancient ladies
Who creaked on the greenhouse ladders,
Reaching up white strings
To wind, to wind
The sweet-pea tendrils, the smilax,
Nasturtiums, the climbing
Roses, to straighten
Carnations, red
Chrysanthemums; the stiff
Stems, jointed like corn,
They tied and tucked, —
These nurses of nobody else.
Quicker than birds, they dipped
Up and sifted the dirt;
They sprinkled and shook;
They stood astride pipes,
Their skirts billowing out wide into tents,
Their hands twinkling with wet;
Like witches they flew along rows
Keeping creation at ease;
With a tendril for needle
They sewed up the air with a stem;
They teased out the seed that the cold kept asleep, —
All the coils, loops, and whorls.
They trellised the sun; they plotted for more than themselves.

I remember how they picked me up, a spindly kid,
Pinching and poking my thin ribs
Till I lay in their laps, laughing,
Weak as a whiffet;
Now, when I'm alone and cold in my bed,
They still hover over me,
These ancient leathery crones,
With their bandannas stiffened with sweat,
And their thorn-bitten wrists,
And their snuff-laden breath blowing lightly over me in my first
sleep.

THREE SPIRITS

About twenty years ago, I heard a story. And whether it's the true or should-be-true variety may not matter. But Robert Lowell had thrown a party; Roethke was his houseguest. Later, all the revelers having gone home to bed, Lowell was holding forth on this one and that one, the usual party post-mortem, stopping particularly to point out someone — who it was I can't recall — as his "best friend." To which Roethke, large and sad and half-lost by that hour to good drink, is said to have said quietly to Lowell: you're my best friend.

I'm still inordinately touched by this anecdote. Roethke's sweetness, his lack of self-consciousness and embarrassment, works wonderfully against the way the elegant Lowell must have surely felt awkward all of a sudden. But other things are carried too — Roethke's edge of self-pity, for instance, disconcertingly near the easy, the sentimental, an apt illustration of his much loved and suspect line, "We think by feeling,/What is there to know?" I knew something turned in me nonetheless, and won me over. Irony has its pleasures when you're 25. But Roethke — he was downright corny in such a moment, putting himself out there anyway.

I like that *anyway* about him. In this he's one of the most American of our century's poets: expansive, passionately accurate about detail, especially natural detail; secret, sometimes sloppy, reverent, maybe too close for his own good to the heart. He is also one of our most daring (his probably the best ear going), risking not merely ornamental change but real change, from the abstract verities of his first book though the amazing grounding of his second — with the so-called "greenhouse poems" — past that into a disturbing near-wacko ranging toward sing-song rhythms and childish diction, into, finally, the long meditative poems, true wonders of human discovery. Stroked as he was for his first book, *Open House*, he could have easily paid in full and bought that farm — its formal, distant grace — and farmed it for a lifetime. He didn't.

What's forever interesting to me is *how* he didn't, how — because of what? — his second book, *The Lost Son*, arrived. Here's

where Michigan comes in, his what must have been, in fact, a rather difficult childhood, son of stolid no-nonsense immigrants (as in "My mother's countenance/ Could not unfrown itself"). Still, it was "a wonderful place for a child to grow up," he has written as though in cahoots with the region's PR people, going on to count specific treasures — twenty-five acres under glass, and farther out, the last stand of virgin timber in the Saginaw Valley, its herons, muskrats, frogs. And the famous greenhouses of that book? "They were to me, I realize now," he told the BBC, "both heaven and hell, a kind of tropics created in the savage climate of Michigan, where austere German-Americans turned their love of order and their terrifying efficiency into something truly beautiful."

Poems, of course, are built of heaven and hell, the earth *as is*, and under glass, Roethke's world forever in that greenhouse shadow, decay there, and danger, certainly death though beauty — it's the thing beyond all doubt. His major life-luck was probably finding that his own odd place and time made directly for poems, beauty large and close as an ordinary or awful day of childhood. And so he takes us straight to that place. He shows us something.

Memorable poetry has this way of orbiting the beginning of things to bring on darkness, and thus one's first awareness — of pattern, ancient cycle, universal turn. "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz" ends the first section of *The Lost Son*, and on the face of it, the poem is pure elegy, three old greenhouse workers of his father's whom Roethke returns to life, and so praises them. We witness, it seems, everything they ever did or imagined doing — their winding the sweet-pea tendrils, straightening carnations, tying and tucking, dipping, sifting, sprinkling, sewing, teasing out "the seed that the cold kept asleep." The whole first stanza is a busy, lush assemblage of unending duties, the intricate clockwork of the greenhouse in wild motion before us, quickened by the shortened lines, enjambment making turns both urgent and graceful. Roethke's eye for the right detail brings an almost surreal focus on many things, stems "jointed like corn" or the way these women draw out their silent charges, using "a tendril for needle," sewing up the air. It's the view of a child really, a child amazed as an

adult might be, looking up the greenhouse ladders to their super-human handiwork, their “skirts billowing out wide tents.” Finally, by the stanza’s end, one’s nearly squinting to see up there. “They trellised the sun,” the poet tells us. And of their generosity, “they plotted for more than themselves.”

Roethke liked to say, quoting Yeats, that “we go from exhaustion to exhaustion.” In life, and perhaps in any writing too. But immortal now by elegy, these women never tire. The second, final stanza goes abruptly another way. Out of the very public sweep of stanza one, everything goes private, Roethke’s favorite way of moving. These focused, workaday women poke and tickle the “spindly kid” the speaker dreams he was. And he laughs too much, “weak as a whiffet.” I love this layer, its release against the solid bramble above of so much work, the previous climbing, tying, sprinkling, tucking. This other, warmer side is play, and spirit — three spirits, to be exact. Next line or two, they are invoked like that. They hover now; all’s gone hushed, interior. They guard the speaker, who’s grown and haunted by what’s least romantic in them, these “leathery crones,” their “bandannas stiffened with sweat,” their “thorn-bitten wrists.” Yet even these bits of fact are cherished; they bring if not peace, at least a curious consolation. I like to say that fierce, three-stressed phrase, *thorn bitten wrists*, and know the zoom-lens closeness of that hand, moved by the history of pain and labor in the scratches. Dark and light, heaven and hell in some hopeless mix. The poet honors the essence of those women when he honors that, as well as something larger.

After I heard that story of Roethke and Lowell, which is to say, when I first read Roethke, I was living in a place where sometimes at night, driving home, we’d pass four or five greenhouses way off the road in a distant field. They glowed that eerie green they glow, in winter, in summer, it didn’t matter. I can’t say that every time I thought of Roethke. But I always thought the world stranger and more dear, such moments.

THE LOST SON

1. *The Flight*

At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry:
I was lulled by the slamming of iron,
A slow drip over stones,
Toads brooding wells.
All the leaves stuck out their tongues;
I shook the softening chalk of my bones,
Saying,
Snail, snail, glister me forward,
Bird, soft-sigh me home,
Worm, be with me.
This is my hard time.

Fished in an old wound,
The soft pond of repose;
Nothing nibbled my line,
Not even the minnows came.

Sat in an empty house
Watching shadows crawl,
Scratching.
There was one fly.
Voice, come out of the silence.
Say something.
Appear in the form of a spider
Or a moth beating the curtain.

Tell me:
Which is the way I take;
Out of what door do I go,
Where and to whom?

Dark hollows said, lee to the wind,
The moon said, back of an eel,

The salt said, look by the sea,
Your tears are not enough praise,
You will find no comfort here,
In the kingdom of bang and blab.

Running lightly over spongy ground,
Past the pasture of flat stones,
The three elms,
The sheep strewn on a field,
Over a rickety bridge
Toward the quick-water, wrinkling and rippling.

Hunting along the river,
Down among the rubbish, the bug-riddled foliage,
By the muddy pond-edge, by the bog-holes,
By the shrunken lake, hunting, in the heat of summer.

The shape of a rat?
It's bigger than that.
It's less than a leg
And more than a nose,
Just under the water
It usually goes.

Is it soft like a mouse?
Can it wrinkle its nose?
Could it come in the house
On the tips of its toes?

Take the skin of a cat
And the back of an eel,
Then roll them in grease, —
That's the way it would feel.

It's sleek as an otter
With wide webby toes
Just under the water
It usually goes.

THE SECRET JOINERY OF SONG

What I have always loved about this poem is its tremendous *physicality*. Even though it is a poem that evokes great emotional/spiritual pain (and some resolution thereof) it is the physical energy of the poem, manifested in its rhythms and onomatopoeic reverberations, that makes it so palpable, so alive.

I can think of no greater leap in growth between a poet's first and second books than that of Roethke's *Open House* and *The Lost Son and other poems*, published in 1941 and 1948, respectively. *Open House* was a solid book of traditional, somewhat metaphysical lyrics. *The Lost Son* (and particularly its title poem and companion pieces "Give Way, Ye Gates," "The Long Alley," "The Shape of the Fire," etc.) is completely different: looser (though still exquisitely crafted), wilder, more intuitive than intellectual, intense, disturbing, playful, and utterly original. These longish poems seem almost surreal at times, but on closer reading are much less arbitrary than most surrealist verse. Their verbal energy is closer to Joyce than anything else. Another admitted influence is Mother Goose. Those two are an interesting combination of influences. Roethke also read widely, though not systematically, in eastern philosophies and religions.

"The Lost Son" and several other poems in the volume were written after Roethke returned to his home town of Saginaw, Michigan, in early 1946 to recuperate from his second major manic-depressive episode. There had been a gestation period for these poems, several years, in fact, and he had already written many of the so-called "greenhouse poems" before working on these even more innovative poems. His father, who died when Roethke was thirteen, was a greenhouse owner and operator. "The Lost Son" is a "father" poem and a poem filled with the things of the greenhouse and its surrounding properties. The poem itself is not so much *about* manic-depression (I'm not even sure it was called manic-depression then) as it is—in its rhythms, its mood swings, its heights and depths—a literary equivalent. Highly controlled, of course, distilled, its chaos yielding insight rather than obscuring

it. In a letter to William Carlos Williams in May of 1946 he writes of "The Lost Son": "It's written, as you'll see right away, for the ear, not the eye. It's written to be heard. And if you don't think it's got the accent of native American speech, your name ain't W. C. Williams, I say belligerently." And, a little later in the same letter, he says he is trying to get "the mood or the action on the page, not talked about, not the meditative T.S. Eliot kind of thing." In an essay called "Open Letter" Roethke says of the "Lost Son" poems in general (before going on to offer a useful gloss of the specific poem): "But believe me: you will have no trouble if you approach these poems as a child would, naively, with your whole being awake, your faculties loose and alert. *Listen* to them, for they are written to be heard, with the themes coming alternately, as in music, and usually a partial resolution at the end."

"The Lost Son" is a difficult poem from which to excerpt because so much of its power depends on the *movement* of the poem, on the contrast between sections, or the contrast within sections, or even the contrasts in individual *lines* (see the longer-lined parts of section 3, "The Gibber") but it might be useful to discuss the first stanza because it sets the mood, the central themes, and the *modus operandi* of the whole poem:

1. *The Flight*

At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry:
I was lulled by the slamming of iron,
A slow drip over stones,
Toads brooding wells.
All the leaves stuck out their tongues;
I shook the softening chalk of my bones,
Saying,
Snail, snail, glister me forward,
Bird, soft-sigh me home,
Worm, be with me.
This is my hard time.

The poem begins with an evocation of the dead. The central death in the poem, the heart of its heart, is the death of the speaker's father. The music, the oxymoronic and onomatopoeic quality, of the second line is wonderful—the "l" consonance sets us up for something soft, mellifluous, but what we get is the opposite, something harsh, aurally painful. We are pulled both ways, at the same time. The speaker is lulled by what would not normally be lulling: the slamming of iron: coffins, crypts, cemetery gates? He is lulled by this loss? Sometimes yes, sometimes not, for the struggle with the father, alive and dead, is a difficult struggle. The next line has three open evocative "o" sounds and is heavily stressed, giving a visual/tactile quality to time, making concrete what is normally abstract. The next line contains a typo that I believe Roethke consciously chose not to correct in later printings. The line was intended to be "toads brooding *in* wells," which is grammatically correct, but without the preposition "brooding" becomes more associative, making it more likely for the reader to also hear the word "breeding." This line too (particularly without the "in") is heavily stressed: *bang, bang, bang*, the dolorous tone hammered slowly into the reader's ear, heart. Robert Frost said the best way to the reader's heart/mind (he used the words synonymously) was through the reader's ear. Roethke knew this was true and is establishing it very early and very deliberately, in the poem. The childlike serio-comic paranoia of the next line is important because it prepares us for other similar things that happen in the poem and it "lulls" us momentarily before the more serious next line, a line that suggests the breakdown of the body, perhaps even as a symbol for impotence, either physical and/or emotional. Something is going on, there is action, reverberation, every rift in every line loaded with ore, nothing wasted or in excess, nothing lazy or prosy! The last four lines of this stanza announce many of the strategies of the poem (addressing an animal or an inanimate object, for example, almost as one would address a deity) while at the same time containing a powerful evocation of a human condition. The rhythm is again heavily stressed and descending, a lot of spondees and trochees. This combination of imagery, metaphor, and music never fails to shoot me into the rest of this poem, fully

arresting my attention and firing my pulse, despite having read and taught this poem hundreds of times. "Glister" is a brilliant word choice here, normally a noun (and archaic) but here a verb and a command making us concentrate on the shiny trail of slime the snail leaves behind as it ekes forward, a brilliant metaphor for the emotional and psychological struggle this poem illuminates.

I heard someone say once that there is a lesson in good poetry writing in every line Theodore Roethke wrote. This is true. And also true, always true, is the incredible integrity of imagination, the wide open singing, the whole heart, the gift of this splendid poet.

THE WAKING

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

A SECOND READING

It is an axiom among contemporary poets that a fine poem cannot be paraphrased, and though I have for many years felt instant pleasure from Roethke's "The Waking," I tremble when anyone asks, "What does he mean by 'I wake to sleep'? Has he a snooze alarm on his clock? Is he trying to sleep off a hangover? Is there something he has to do this morning that he doesn't want to do? What does he mean by 'I feel my fate in what I cannot fear'?" To all such questions I should have to answer, "What do you think?" or "Ask the poet." One widely published poet of my acquaintance said of his own poem, in effect, "Don't analyse my poem. Float on it." Others have said, "It just came to me." Others have handed me their worksheets. For years I have floated on the pleasures of "The Waking." Now it is time to re-examine those lines and decide, if possible, why and how they have created my pleasure.

The villanelle is a difficult form to write. It consists of four tercets and a final four-line stanza, and it uses only two end rhymes. The first and last line of the first tercet should each be repeated exactly as the last line in alternate tercets, and the final stanza should conclude with both the first and last lines of the four tercets, thus making eight of the poem's nineteen lines refrains. The success of the villanelle depends upon the poet's finding two lines that he can bear to repeat four times each. The poet's genius lies in being able to vary these two key lines just enough to keep their refrain quality while allowing the meaning of the poem to grow. Roethke wrote just one villanelle with such flexible key lines. I find only one other villanelle in the *Collected Poems*: "The Right Thing," part of "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical," in *The Far Field*. This villanelle uses as its key lines, "Let others probe the mystery if they can" and "The right thing happens to the happy man." The resulting villanelle reads almost like a parody of "The Waking" or a failed first draft, although it was published in a later book.

The first tercet of "The Waking" immediately creates mys-

tery by using paradox. Waking to sleep suggests both a need to evade reality and a new reality altogether, a need to let go of mind, to stop using conscious effort and trust dream or perhaps intuition instead. He feels that his fate (destiny) will lie in something familiar or so insignificant that whatever it does will be a surprise, good or bad or perhaps insignificant. There is threat in this line. Roethke was not a man who relished insignificance. The third line may suggest to him complacency or despair or an acknowledgment of the power of death.

The first line of the second tercet is not a repetition of the opening line of the poem, but it is, in fact, a restatement and amplification of that line's idea. Feeling is the sleep that frees the spirit to drift and dream. Roethke doubts that any other kind of knowing is possible or important. In the next line his mind is dancing in his head between his ears. Is the dancer trying to get out, or is the slumbering mind dreaming of dancing, a dream that an active, sensual man might have? In the last line he is still asleep, still waking slowly into this new kind of perception.

The first line of tercet three appears to move still farther from the first line of the poem. It seems to throw Roethke back into the waking world that he had drifted from, but actually he has drifted farther into his sleep world. He seems to see another person and speak to him. But is the creature he speaks to a person? Is the creature he sees beside him perhaps a feathered or a furred one or perhaps something very small and very precious that he must not step on? The refrain line at the end of this tercet is part of the preceding sentence, in which Roethke asks God to bless the ground. He is not wholly asleep now. Slowly, he is waking into kindness.

In the fourth tercet Roethke continues to observe and enjoy the creatures and the landscape in his dream country: he sees a tree as if by new light. He notices a worm, a "lowly worm," inching up a "winding stair." Literally it is a worm, but the words *lowly* and *winding stair* suggest an abject self starting to climb toward self-respect in a devious, tortuous manner.

Tercet five deifies "Great Nature," not as Mother, but as a

god who commands. Roethke's mood by this time is idyllic, a mood reinforced by the l's of *lively*, *lovely*, and *learn*. Nature's sleep has brought him to a state of playful bliss.

The final four-line stanza of the poem wakes Roethke finally out of that bliss. He speaks of his "shaking" and recognizes what it means. I read "shaking" as a reference to the confusion that caused him to "wake to sleep," a doubt about his identity that makes him want to see himself from a different perspective. The metaphor of shaking works well here: shaking can return balance to a wobbling cup or to a pair of human legs that stagger from weakness. Cold can cause shaking and fear. Roethke knew all the inner shakings of fear: fear for his sanity, fear for his self-respect, and especially fear for his life, without which none of the other fears could be cured. "What falls away is always" is a literal statement, not a pun or an adjective but a synonym for *forever*. He suspected that death was near, and it was. He died at fifty-five.

"The Waking" may not be an orthodox villanelle, since it does not repeat the first and last line of each tercet exactly, but his variations make a static form into a lively narrative and permit a progression of tones from wonder to bliss to dread.

A second reading of Roethke goes far to persuade me that his work is not as profound as Rilke's nor as subtle as Stafford's nor as quirky as Simic's nor as mysterious as Merwin's early work. But his humility and music and courage are very appealing qualities in the confused 1990s. I myself often walk in his dark woods, and for pure pleasure I reread "The Waking."

WORD-WORK

When I want an example of language doing its damndest, its very best, its nothing-else-can-do-it work, I often think of one of the repeated lines of Theodore Roethke's villanelle "The Waking": "I learn by going where I have to go." It's the *have* that does it: is it the *have* of necessity, the one we sometimes pronounce "haff," the one we learn to protest against as children (Oh Mom, do I *have* to?)? Or is it the *have* of possession, of opportunity (Look what I have!)? I can hold that *have* in my hand, I can have that *have*, and it's precisely its indeterminacy that makes it so solid.

I could have gotten it from another utterance, and indeed the "lesson" carries over: "This is what I have to do," I sometimes remind myself. But it's of course the line, and ultimately the poem itself, that give Roethke's word its power. The line contains a life, and summarizes endless debate about free will and determinism too: do we have to go where we go, or is "where" to some extent up to us? Death, our ultimate "have to," is there as well, of course, so abundantly that it's possible to read the poem with little else in mind. But such a reading is precisely what the language keeps pushing against. Though the infinitive in "I have to go" echoes the infinitive in the poem's other repeated line, "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow," there's a tense play in both lines between gerund and infinitive, between process and arrival. If the poem allows us to balance freedom and necessity, to have both in a single word, it also allows us, through an intricate play of language, to balance death and life, ending and going on.

"I wake to sleep" has its own tense power: is "sleep" indeed part of an infinitive, as in "I wake in order to sleep," or is it a noun, as in "I wake to a new day," or "I wake to the sound of your voice"? The phrase is so odd, so insistently backwards, that it's difficult not to hear "I go to sleep" in it, too. That suggests the end of it; but the "and" that follows implies either concurrence or sequence, and then voila, there's the waking again. As in take it easy, enjoy it while you can — or even as in take a nap or take a cure, a prescription for happy living. More hauntingly, "waking"

may be experienced not only as a grammatical object, but also as a personified one. There's a curious change of grammatical partners here: the speaker wakes to the presence of "sleep" in the first part of the line, but then takes "waking" in the last part, as a man might take a woman, for instance. If this seems farfetched, consider the other lines where "take" appears: in the fourth stanza, "Light takes the Tree"; in the fifth, the reader (or someone) is told to "take the lively air" — another prescription, maybe, or maybe more. "Who can embrace the body of his fate?" Roethke asks in "Four for Sir John Davies."

Several characteristics of "The Waking" recur in Roethke's other published villanelle, "The Right Thing": one of the repeated lines of the later poem plays a similar game of repetition ("The right thing happens to the happy man"); "God bless the roots!" is about as direct an echo as one can imagine of "The Waking"'s "God bless the Ground!"; and what's "learned" in the two poems is certainly similar. But "The Right Thing" is a lonely poem; it has no one to talk to but itself, whereas "The Waking" is haunted by other presences.

Five of the poem's first six lines begin with "I," and the interruption in the fourth line ("We think by feeling. What is there to know?") is inconspicuous, marking an easy shift to a universal *we*. A similar statement and question universalize the beginning of the fourth stanza ("Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?"), and even the "you and me" of the fifth stanza seems to reach out to a universal reader.

Or would seem to, if it weren't for the line that opens the third stanza with its suggestive internal rhyme: "Of those so close beside me, which are you?" Which, indeed? *Which* itself hovers: which of many, or which of a few, or even (as *beside* may suggest) of two? The poem doesn't tell us, but the line creates a presence that carries over into the fifth stanza:

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

Here "having to" and "having" confront each other directly: Nature is given the power of possession in the first half of the stanza, carrying with it the poem's most unequivocal reference to death; but *you* are advised to take charge in the last half, where, for the first time, the powerful *have* disappears altogether from the repeated line.

And who is *you*? All of us, surely, and those of us who read this poem, in particular: this is the kind of imperative we're apt to take personally. But "which are you?" hovers in the background, and when "lively" transforms itself into "lovely," we're certainly near the language of love poetry. Which is not to suggest that this is a love poem: there's a *carpe diem* sentiment in this stanza, but it points away from the speaker, and the question of who is taking whom, or what, is after all a mighty shifty business.

One of the formal lessons Roethke has to teach in this villanelle is that a form laden with repetition can be enhanced by even more repetition: thus the two additional *takes*, as well as the *waking/wake* and *going/go* of the repeated lines. Another end rhyme gets repeated when the second stanza's "What is there to know?" is echoed in the sixth ("I should know"); but here it's *there* that acts up most, wanting to contain the thereness of place ("What is *there* to know?") as well as the absence of meaning that its expletive function implies (What *is* there to know, after all?).

But is there a there there? When *there* gets repeated in "God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there," it carries the echo of "waking slow," and once again resonates with apparently conflicting possibilities. Is the ground of the line the one we walk on now, in contrast to the transcendent light and air of the next two stanzas? Or is it, as the future tense suggests, the ground we end up *in*? If it's the latter, "I shall walk softly there" makes a little joke about the grave, nodding toward the sleeping dead and considering, in the next line, a destination beyond it.

The beginning of the poem's last stanza seems both to sum up its process ("This shaking keeps me steady") and to illustrate it once again (Where do we put the stress on "I should know"?). But then there's a final turn of language, before the two repeated

lines assert themselves quietly one last time. "What falls away is always" makes the adverb a noun, but this reification is part of a lively process: the word both appears and disappears, becoming something, then falling away. When the line continues, *always* finds its partner in *near* and returns to something more like its usual function. The poem lets us have *always*, even as it's taking it away. That the sound of the language once again helps this happen is part of the magic of the line: one can hear the sounds of *always* in "falls away," so that the falling away inevitably produced by "going where I have to go" leaves something linguistically dynamic in its place.

"The word outleaps the world," Roethke says in "Four for Sir John Davies," suggesting dance, suggesting play. But it's more than word-play. It's word-work, doing what only language can do, taking us — or helping us go — where only language can take us.

THE CHUMS

Some are in prison; some are dead;
And none has read my books,
And yet my thought turns back to them,
And I remember looks

Their sisters gave me, once or twice;
But when I slowed my feet,
They taught me not to be too nice
The way I tipped my hat.

And when I slipped upon the ice,
They saw that I fell more than twice.
I'm grateful for that.

MORE MAJOR

When I think of the Roethke poems I love the most, "Meadow Mouse," "The Thing," "Otto," "The Storm," "Dolor," "Frau Bauman," "Slug," "The Geranium," "All Morning," "Moss Gathering," "Child on Top of a Greenhouse," "My Papa's Waltz" — to name what comes to me first — I realize how non-political, how non-social, they are, how they are concerned with the helpless victim, with the good thing ruined, with the anguish and wonder of the small and ignored, with the soul besieged, and that the main emotion is pity or fear or terror. There is a little social commentary in "The Geranium" — the "snuffling cretin of a maid" is after all "sacked" for throwing the plant out (pot and all) and that shows something of "socio-economic dynamics," including, I am ashamed to say, the arrogance and cruelty of the employer, as well as female-bashing — but the poem truly centers on the pathetic and almost wise flower, the plant as female companion and the desperate loneliness of the poet, those other issues being subsidiary. And "Otto." Though that beautiful poem is not political, it contains, like a novel, a whole world of information about culture, character, gestures, dreams and lost dreams, ambitions and passions, and it therefore reflects social conditions and moral imperatives. This in forty-two lines, three stanzas of eleven lines and a fourth of nine. Or "Dolor" and "Academic." These can be seen perhaps as poems of social commentary, the soul lost to institutional horror: ". . . dust from the walls of institutions,/Finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica" . . . "Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate grey standard faces." Though that poem is more Kafka than it is Rexroth or Shapiro, as the second one, "Academic," is more Pope than anything else — or Swift — a rage against (and a contempt for) the unmanly, blustering, stylized, theoretical fool.

Maybe "The Chums," of all his poems, is the most politically conscious. It is one of his few where the action points *out* instead of *in*, where the world, as world, is considered in preference to the one victim, the one sufferer, or the other. The speaker is the

poet, it is the poet most literally, and he is acted upon and different, indeed he is pushed down "more than once" upon the ice, but Roethke changes the note, and the speaker, instead of being helpless and subject to unbearable forces and cruel uncontrollable pressures — and thereby driven into a state of terror or horror — is subject, as far as the poet is concerned, to a more or less reasonable and unsurprising assault, considering the circumstances. After all, the poet left the confines of that restricted world and "made good," and even when he was still one of the "chums" he had a slightly different head upon his shoulders. He was a semi-outsider; he tipped his hat. Roethke has no anger, no resentment; he got what he deserved. He knows that.

I love the first two lines:

Some are in prison; some are dead;
And none has read my books.

There is affection for those friends, and a kind of pity, as if for the dead. And enormous separation, psychically and temporally. There is almost a kind of loyalty to them — and their code. And in a fit of genius he expresses his "gratitude" for their judgment, for the punishment.

I feel a whole world in the eleven lines. The economy is amazing, and the delicacy; and the balances, pauses, rhythmic repetitions and rhymes. It is a poem that comes out of a certain culture at a certain period of time. The word choices are unerring, and the symbolic action is so perfect that we forget it is just that, and take it for mere narrative. But what I love most about it is the sanity, the wisdom and the moral tone. We are not here in the world of lost childhood, abominable *or* beautiful, we are not about to be assaulted and perhaps destroyed by irrational forces not to our understanding and control. We are — he is — an actor in a familiar social situation who understands, and even thinks appropriate, the judgment and force used against him, and who looks at his judges with love and calls them "chums." It is a little bit of rural America from the late twenties and early thirties. It is an experience that almost every one of us who moved out of his

or her first culture has experienced. And it is rife with knowledge of that culture and a gentle approval of its severe egalitarian ethos.

Roethke was not a crazy tortured victim out of some internal or external madhouse; he was sophisticated, educated and cunning. He chose a certain subject matter over another. He was obsessed with certain things. He was *not* innocent and helpless, any more than the rest of us are. He broke down from time to time because he had an ailment. He was obsessed with isolation, helplessness and the terrible onslaught. In a way, it was the subject of his times. "Chums" shows a slightly different way he could have gone. The way of responsibility, irony, social connection. He did go that way, to one degree or another, in many others of his poems. That quality only makes him more complete, as it makes him more complicated. It makes him more major.

THE TREE, THE BIRD

Uprose, uprose, the stony fields uprose,
And every snail dipped toward me its pure horn.
The sweet light met me as I walked toward
A small voice calling from a drifting cloud.
I was a finger pointing at the moon,
At ease with joy, a self-enchanted man.
Yet when I sighed, I stood outside my life,
A leaf unaltered by the midnight scene,
Part of a tree still dark, still, deathly still,
Riding the air, a willow with its kind,
Bearing its life and more, a double sound,
Kin to the wind, and the bleak whistling rain.

The willow with its bird grew loud, grew louder still.
I could not bear its song, that altering
With every shift of air, those beating wings,
The lonely buzz behind my midnight eyes; —
How deep the mother-root of that still cry!

The present falls, the present falls away;
How pure the motion of the rising day,
The white sea widening on a farther shore.
The bird, the beating bird, extending wings —
Thus I endure this last pure stretch of joy,
The dire dimension of a final thing.

THE CASE OF "THE TREE, THE BIRD"

Chapter I

It was a still, hot day, the kind that makes your ears ring and your eyelids sweat. I was tired, bone tired, from a late night working up a list of oral imagery in Donne and Marvell. I leaned back in my chair. The truth was I just didn't want to get started on the case. Previous investigators had called it open and shut, written it off as a simple allegory. A misdemeanor at worst.

But the poetry detective must have a criminal mind, get inside the perp's head, understand his motives, his habits, reconstruct the crime.

In the case of "The Tree, The Bird," I had few clues. But it struck me it bore a mysterious resemblance to a case I handled years back, the case of the "Night Crow." It paid, in my profession, to keep up one's ornithological knowledge because nine times out of ten you could bet where there's a poem there's a bird involved somewhere. In the "Night Crow" case I was dealing with duplicity, the kind of mind that seemed to be in two places at once. I'd been hired to find out *what does the bird symbolize* by the author of a textbook on poetry. That was a tough one.

So was this. What I had was one Theodore Roethke, vanished. One bird, one tree. And a whole lot of questions: Why was the poem so little discussed by critics, relegated to an "also ran," a Roethkean et cetera in his *Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical*? Why the sigh in the seventh line, considering the speaker seemed to be in a fine mood until then? Why the return to formalism after the expansive free verse of the *North American Sequence*? Was the speaker journeying toward true mystical transcendence or returning to the sense of exaltation which characterized the manic phase of his manic-depressive cycle? And what could I make of the cryptic clue that the deceased had "discovered the secret of Nijinsky"?

I popped open a Snapple. I leaned forward in my chair.

Chapter II

I decided to begin by reviewing my earlier case. Like the man often said, "You must go backward to go forward." Maybe I could find a connection. I dug up my file on "Night Crow" in which Roethke's conjunctive tree-bird image first occurs.

When I saw that clumsy crow
Flap from a wasted tree,
A shape in my mind rose up:
Over the gulfs of dream
Flew a tremendous bird
Further and further away
Into a moonless black,
Deep in the brain, far back.

It is an image that haunts the closing sequence of *The Far Field*. In "The Sequel," the lines "A shape called up out of my natural mind;/ I heard a bird stir in its true confine" can't help but recall "Night Crow" as well as foreshadow "The Tree, The Bird." In "The Decision," Roethke writes, "A bird kept haunting me when I was young—/The phoebe's slow retreating from its song,/Nor could I put that song out of my mind,/The sleepy sound of leaves in a light wind."

Obsession is the mother of craft. There aren't too many hard and fast rules in this business, but that's one I try to stick by. Because no image is ever complete, a poet may return to the same image again and again. What does the bird symbolize? my client wanted to know.

It was a question that begged the question. Which bird? The crow flapping from the tree or the "tremendous bird" rising in the speaker's mind? Either way it was a question that mistakenly isolated thing from process — the journey of the bird is followed through space "further and further away" and, simultaneously, "far back," not away from the speaker but toward some nether-horizon in him. The transient image (bird taking flight) reaches a different duration in the mind.

I set down the Snapple and let it sweat on my notes. Maybe I was on the wooly edge of some epiphany, maybe not. But it seemed the initial mirroring in “Night Crow” between bird and bird, outward space and inward, distance and intimacy, brevity and duration, is finally rendered in “The Tree, The Bird” in a language and form that physically embody and enact it, yoking the obsessive image to mature craft.

While much critical discussion of the *Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical* debates the “success” of Roethke’s return to formalism and whether or not his language convincingly renders a mystical transcendence of the self, “The Tree, The Bird,” with its archetypal landscape and highly orchestrated use of language, dramatizes the duality of the sensory and the spiritual through its “double sound.” I wasn’t so sure the issue here was transcendence as much as it was a conscious experiment in craft to use formal elements — doubling, repetition, echo — to evoke “oneness.” The poem looked likely to reveal much about the demands Roethke made on language. I’d studied his m.o. and was ready to sift the evidence.

Chapter III

It was about midnight, still still and still hot. I was thinking to myself, Either the amount of repetition of single words contained in such a short lyric points to a failure of language, a lapse into mannerism, or it serves as part of form following function, a language in which the word repeated is part of the larger correspondence of the poem. In “The Tree, The Bird,” *still* occurs five times, *pure* three times, *joy*, *midnight*, *beating*, *wings* each occur twice. And then there’s *bird*, of course, three times. There is, as well, a pattern that goes from *bearing* to *bear* to *endure* and from *unaltered* to *altering* to *shift*, reflecting the poem’s tension between form and transformation.

A solid lead, but I’d need more to crack the case. I knew that much; I’d attended Lit Crit basic training regularly, until I was kicked out for refusing to translate metaphors. A misdemeanor at worst. But my training in surveillance was proving more relevant now. On a stakeout, 90% of the time you’re looking at patterns —

what time X or Y comes or goes, when he eats, when he sleeps. X is the poem.

Each stanza contains a line wherein part of the same phrase is repeated, yet the meaning shifts. In the opening stanza, "part of a tree still dark, still, deathly still" is not only rhythmically effective, a rocking motion that prepares us for "Riding the air" in the next line, it shifts our sense of the word *still* from time, as in "it's still dark out," through the second *still* which at once emphasizes time/duration and yet evokes also our sense of motionlessness, to "deathly still" which clearly evokes the motionless while the modifier *deathly* gives a sense of finality to the element of time.

Similarly, "grew loud, grew louder still" in the second stanza does not use the word *still* merely to emphasize the increasing loudness of the bird. For the speaker, "grew louder still" means "grew louder" in its stillness. It recalls the line from "Infirmity"—"My ears still hear the bird when all is still." The loudness-in-stillness of the stanza's opening "rhymes" with its closing in which the speaker refers to "that still cry."

I was beginning to wonder how much the poem had to do with listening. And calling. I made a note to follow up. Scrawled on the opposite page in my notebook was an earlier note I'd left myself. It said, "Present tense."

The third stanza opens with another twinning within the line, "The present falls, the present falls away." Again, Roethke uses echoing phrases to yoke altered meanings: "the present falls" quite literally in the poem as it shifts with this stanza into the present tense, and then "the present falls away" as the speaker shifts into an experience of the eternal present.

A good night's work. I tumbled into bed and dreamt I was in a hall of mirrors. Each time I went forward toward one mirror, my image receded backward into it. Down the hall a cloud drifted. Nested atop it was a giant talking raven named Otto.

Chapter IV

One of the entries in Roethke's *Notebooks* says, "Yes, it's possible to create a true natural order simply by putting things down repeatedly." But the pattern of repetition in "The Tree, The Bird"

is only part of Roethke's "double sound." The poem's initial reverie creates an animated landscape where *uprose* in the first line, *dipped* in the second, the contrasting motions of being met and walking toward, in the third, create a dance-like movement which continues as the speaker is drawn toward the voice calling from a cloud and then describes himself "pointing at the moon." Within this excitation of opposite motions, one auditory image — "the small voice calling" — initiates an antiphonal structure in the poem which embodies another thematic element.

I was on the track of the sigh.

The pattern of calling to and from the self, listening and reply, begins in that fourth line as the speaker walks toward the voice calling to him from a cloud. The response is the "I sighed" of the seventh line. In terms of the speaker's description of being "at ease with joy" and "self-enchanted," the reader isn't led to expect a sigh except perhaps of supreme contentment. But clearly, since the sigh initiates imagery of darkness, "midnight," "bleak whistling rain," it is not an expression of enchantment but a response to a call outside it, the call to "stand outside" the self. Roethke's "self-enchanted" here means quite literally its etymological roots, *in + cantare*, the self in chant, the self in song.

I wondered if Heidegger was anywhere in Roethke's library or if coincidence was just coincidence. The calling to and from seemed to resonate with Heidegger's notion that "language speaks" and that the poem is a calling of *world* and *things* into a onefold intimacy in their being "toward one another." The calling toward this dimension of the onefold is the "double-stilling" and the calling from it, "the peal of stillness."

Additionally, the stillness Heidegger speaks of "stills by carrying out, *bearing* and *enduring* world and things in their presence" (my italics). At the end of the first stanza, the speaker becomes part of a tree which he describes as "bearing its life and more, a double sound." The double sound becomes again a calling and response in the next stanza where the speaker cannot "bear" the bird's song, a song louder in its stillness. The response is the "lonely buzz behind my midnight eyes." The listening to the song sets off a vibration in him and produces the recognition which

closes the stanza, "How deep the mother-root of that still cry!" No longer standing outside the self, the speaker re-calls the self, its original being, its natural childhood relation to the world. Like the man says, "You must go backward to go forward."

In Roethke's work, the connection between communion and communication goes far back. It is manifested in *The Lost Son*, according to Kenneth Burke, through a rhetorical strategy of using "whenever there is no specific verb required" some word "in the general category of *communication*" to effectively suggest "a world of natural objects in vigorous communication with one another" or, at least, their "mystic participation." The embodiment of communication in the images of tree and bird seems a natural extension of this process.

Roethke's transformation of the speaker into part of the tree is coupled with an awareness it is "bearing its life and more." The double sound is at once the voice outside and within the self, and the bird then appears not only as an allegorical figure for "spirit" but as a muse figure in the pattern of calling and reply that runs through the first two stanzas as the speaker approaches the jump from one plateau, "at ease with joy," to another, "enduring" the "last pure stretch of joy."

Now that I had the bird in hand, so to speak, I still wasn't out of the woods. I still had some questions—oneness or transcendence, mystic or manic, Apollonian or Dionysian? An acceptance of death or premonition of death by water? Was the tree really part of the "secret of Nijinsky"? This was another entry in Roethke's *Notebooks*: "Drink, coffee, cigar. Or cigar, coffee, drink. Or cigar, drink, coffee — or —?"

Chapter V

I emerged from Roethke's psychic landscape into the glare. The thermometer had hit 121°. The kind of day that made you want to haul off and smack it if only personification worked. I decided to go back in.

The poem's journey, whether toward self-transcendence and acceptance of death or toward the oneness and exaltation that

characterized Roethke's experience during an early manic episode, also traces a "more homely but related form of exaltation: creativity itself." In "On 'Identity,'" Roethke describes the metaphysical poet as one who "thinks with his body." Such poets "jump more frequently from one plateau to another." The creation of the poem, for Roethke, is "one of the ways man at least approaches the divine."

These remarks immediately follow his description of writing "The Dance" during which he felt aided by an "actual Presence." Finishing, he "wept for joy. At last I was somebody again." This sense of being entered by, or entering into, a presence outside the self and then being returned, somehow, to a more magnified — exalted — sense of identity parallels his description of "writing the really good poem."

Roethke mentions a line from "The Dance" in a description of his manic episode among the interviews for *In a Dark Time* (cited by Neal Bowers in *Theodore Roethke: The Journey from I to Otherwise*). "I tried to fling my shadow at the moon" — which resembles "The Tree, The Bird"'s "I was a finger pointing at the moon" — was, according to Roethke, an attempt to capture the "dance that accompanies exaltation." An earlier comment on the episode, that he'd had a "mystical experience with a tree" and "discovered the secret of Nijinsky," led biographer Alan Seager to cite a passage in Nijinsky's *Diary* relating a similar experience of ecstatic identification with a tree as a possible explanation of the "secret," thus equating the tree image with the secret of Nijinsky. Yet Roethke's 1935 breakdown occurred the year before the *Diary* appeared and it is a "copy of Nijinsky's life" (the 1934 biography) that Roethke seems to have requested in the sanitarium. He had clearly already connected his experience with Nijinsky because of his experience of "the dance." And what could be closer than dance to "thinking with the body" that, for Roethke, was the process of poetry, his approach to the divine?

In the eternal present of the closing stanza, the movements contrast with the opening stanza's series of opposite motions. The speaker observes the "pure" motion of "the rising day," of the

"white sea widening" and the bird "extending." The corresponding movement of the speaker is indicated with the word *thus* in the penultimate line, "Thus I endure this last pure stretch of joy." He is, like the rest of creation, rising to that new plateau, and yet the word *stretch* not only suggests distance as well as enlargement; it also suggests "stretch of time." The speaker may be enduring a difficult expansion of the spirit beyond the body, but as a poet in dialogue with the spirit, he is also enduring that what is "present" in the creative act's approach of the divine "falls away" and the poem becomes the "dire dimension" he fills only briefly until it is finished, "a final thing."

No doubt there was a sexual metaphor in there somewhere, but I'd get my fill of those soon enough. I'd gotten a desperate call from a victim of Dickinson burn-out about her poem number 1395, a.k.a., "After all Birds have been investigated and laid aside."

IN SUMMER

This is our favorite hall, mostly
for the walls muraled in an orangey-red
W.P.A.-commissioned myth

of Demeter and Persephone. We like it
because it's so Depression and optimistic —
six months of bloom, six of wilt,

the iron symmetry irrefutable —
and because the source of light is locatable:
the pomegranate burning in Persephone's hand.

The artist has her holding it aloft,
like Liberty.
Even under the dusty chandeliers it glows,

the goddesses blaze, the orange of their chitons
rhyming with the fruit
to drive Pluto further back into the mouth of hell

whose smudgy cave ends like an afterthought
in a few sketchy brushstrokes
near the orchestra pit.

We don't know what it means, exactly.
Except perhaps
that orange wins out over gray, in art.

We're here for art.
Zachary trails his fingers
along the wall, kneecapping Allegory

(at three feet, eye-level in this place
is mostly knees) then twists around to see
if the lights on the backs of his sandals

still blink. It's June
and we haven't yet heard that in the cities
children are killing children

for blinking shoes.

*

Zachary's proud — for two days
he's gone down to the creek
with his father to gather rocks.

He carries a single heavy one
from the bed of the truck
to the garden whose wall is beginning

miraculously to rise.

Is this work? he asks Rod.

Do we like to work?

He thinks he prefers it to children's
theatre. He catches a firefly
and names it Dick, tries to give it water.

Dick died, he says later. He was too thirsty.

*

What if I didn't impose on the composition,
let the tiger lily on its too-long stalk
bloom and wilt on the kitchen sill

in its own time?

An orange collapse that needn't mean
beyond itself — is that possible?

Like crossing my fingers behind my back
except I don't know which god
I'm signing. This comes up again with Ben's design —

he's eleven and sanding a log
to make a bench for Father's Day —
he needs help cutting the legs.

His dilemma is mine: Should he keep
sawing by hand, inefficient and too hard,
or ask his father to use the chainsaw?

Kill the surprise but finish the gift?
He looks glumly at me and I'm no help.
I'm afraid of the saw.

*

By some odd confluence this is turning out to be
the summer of biography and the gods,
Chronos this week for Ben,

Leonardo for Rod, Akhmatova and Hopkins
for me. Ben's question:
If Chronos, god of Time, swallows each

of his twelve children at birth, does that mean
he contains time or stops time?
The interval between

the births and swallowings — what's that?
Zachary interrupts to say he's decided
on Batman, despite his brother's veto.

Batman, Venom and Clay Face, he says.
The Bat. We creak back in our chairs
in the humid stew that is Missouri

and look up at the stars. Citronella,
cicadas, hot watery air. We'd stop time
here, if we could.

*

An Irish poet has told us that, for her,
Akhmatova is a rumor. We're surprised.
Even the queueing at the prison, we say,

the cold, the poem to Pasternak, "The Muse"?
Where is my home and where my reason?
No, she says, a rumor.

*How is this age worse than others?
Is it that in the fume of sorrows and alarms
It has touched the blackest ulcer
But could not heal it?*

*In the west Earth's sun still shines
And the roofs of other towns gleam.
But here Death already chalks its mark on houses
And calls the ravens and the ravens fly.*

The date is listed as 1919, but it could just as easily
be 1939, Leningrad, from The House of Entertaining
Science. I can't get over that,

The House of Entertaining Science. I'm reading
the footnotes to Lydia Chukovskaya's
Journals to see if she's being ironic

but no, that's the address, Akhmatova's
flat in the annex where she lived for thirty years.
Not in The House of Creativity,

which had better facilities
and stairwell lights,
the place Lydia thought her friend should be.

I'm at the part now where Chukovskaya
listens to Akhmatova recite,
then goes home to write the verses down

and hide them: "At my request she recited
'Cleopatra' again. I couldn't tell
last time whether it was *shalost* [mischief]

or *zhalost* [pity] . . . She can't pronounce
sh and *zh* clearly —
some of her teeth are broken."

There's the cold in the room, her fraying
shawl, her fear of crossing Nevsky street
unassisted, and the constant noise of the others

in the house, who beat their children.
"All the time Akhmatova was reading to me, from
the next room Tanya could be heard shouting

'You beast, you bastard, just you wait,
you little bastard!' This was Tanya
teaching Valya to do his homework."

*

We'd stop time here if we could.
Zach runs in the yard to catch fireflies,
his heels blinking, shouting at Ben

to leave some for him. They're both
in long white sleepshirts — groundling angels —
a reverse of the great white egrets

we watched fold themselves
into the bayou cypress tops
on the trip to Louisiana we're just

home from. Folding angels,
tea-colored snaky water,
and four children imploring us to stop

the boat, let them haul in the bloated
floating catfish, big as a pig,
the boat nosed almost into,

because, as the Louisiana cousins
said, we don't want
the alligators to get it. A trophy, they say.

From atrophy, do you suppose, someone asks,
stopped time? Ben says
maybe he'll look it up, but not now,

he's not interested
in Time anymore. He wants to know
why a minus times a minus

equals a plus. On each side
of zero, these summer angels.
In the books I'm reading it's always winter.

Akhmatova's stove goes out
and she's diagnosed with cavities
in her lungs. I take up Hopkins's

journals for awhile and look for
my husband's underlinings — a kind of marital
eavesdropping I can't break myself of —

and read that, during a cold snap,
when part of Hopkins's priestly duties
was to clean the outdoor water closets,

he wrote (my husband has marked): "The slate
slabs of the urinals are frosted
in graceful sprays."

Bloom's, or Joyce's, pee was micturition.
Joyce owns that word.
As Hopkins now owns the image,

lacy yellow piss against the frozen
slabs, Queen Anne's lace, say,
or butterwort, yellow warmth

out of season but brought forward
anyway,
out of the body and into art.

On Hopkins's good days, that is,
when both sides
of the zero balanced.

*

What if I didn't impose
on the composition? What if the excrescences,
cypresses, catfish,

murder reports were not forced
into graceful sprays? The orange light
of the lily fails. Should I say

that gray wins out over orange, in life?
What if it were otherwise,
the good meat of the body continuing,

married to soul,
its allotted time vouchsafed?
We would not outlive our children, then,

or abandon them too soon.
In the stopped time that is the poem,
that is the prayer.

PRETTY HAPPY!

I have no siblings who killed themselves, a few breakdowns here and there, my son sometimes talking back to me, but, in general, I'm pretty happy. And if the basement leaks, and fuses fart out when the coffee machine comes on, and if the pastor beats us up with the same old parables, and raccoons overturn the garbage cans and ham it up at 2 o'clock in the morning while some punk is cutting the wires on my car stereo, I can still say, I'm pretty happy.

Pretty Happy! Pretty Happy! I whisper to my wife at midnight, waking to another night noise, reaching for the baseball bat I keep hidden under our bed.

FUNNY HOW

Funny how the breeze on my skin does its ruffling thing
with my thoughts. Not quite affectionate. Funny how

staring at the rug I tattoo the floor, thinking if my hair
was thicker maybe I'd like convertibles and other

big wind. Tonight you're away and I'm happy filling the bed
with such teasing itinerant notions, easy to love and let go.

Before the sound: the flat click of the kitchen door
brings metal to my mouth. Something from the driveway

is in the house — looking for what? I have my voice at hand
and the body that wants to use it as a shield, an elephant

behind a sapling. Funny how all that I am is lying here,
a sweating piece of meat. Where is the maxim to unlock

my throat, how can I throw the pillar-of-salt I'm made of
over my left shoulder? I'd like a wrap of music please. This

would be a good time for a small earthquake, an insomniac
neighbor —
any old clatter to put intruder fear to flight. But if he's real,

if tonight is marked for crime, please let me wake tomorrow
simply to find a hole where the t.v. was, chops thrown

from the freezer. Honey, come home. Don't leave me here
waiting for some gloved hand holding polaroids of my nakedness.

I'm stuck in a child self rigid under stale cloth, an old dream
breathing down my neck: the man without a face, all skin under a
gray hat.

I need to know what's on the other side of that door,
the baldest reading of terror, the only way home.

$$E = MC^2$$

My foot on the gas pedal says yes and goes on gassing
while the electric hairnet under my scalp tingles
a warning. Matter can be crammed with marbleized yes-and-no,
a zigzag greater than the sum of its parts.

You mean one thing, you do much more than another.

Like the mailman's son: giddy, celebrating his new house,
he put the gun to his ear at the barbeque and it's loaded, bang.

Hey, I've fallen asleep at the wheel, haven't you?

What about the woman — turned out it was me — giving a
whack to a

two-year-old, way against policy. Up through my *bon vivant*
mood bubbled a mean swat naked among the baggage for all the
airport

and my step-daughter to see. Oh, sweet clarity with nothing
written out in advance but the daily contradiction: a guy

holed up in a house trailer, detox pamphlets on the table
and a pint on the bed. Nobody's betting. Is that a carsick cow
nodding its sad head at my windshield or just two sides
of beef still as one, riding a truck to where they part company?

Before I get a chance to consider the glass half-full of empty,
a stop sign — and a careening van. Who knows whose screech is
whose,

what color relativity. Unclear — but it's hurtling.

THE SHOP

That spring the rains were especially heavy. Maybe they seem so every spring, but the ground had had all it was going to take, and the creeks spread out into the woods, flat slow sheets of water.

Everyone coming in left the wet, amoebae shapes of their soles on the tiles. Even after they went out with their thick white packages, you could tell where they had been, what they had looked at. Where they were unsure, the floor was heavily darkened.

That would have been enough. But a farmer lost all his hogs when the river trapped them in their pen and held them against the fence. Next day he brought them in and we had to hurry. Their skin was cold and the gold-spangled silt was caught in the folds of their necks.

We didn't notice that blossoms the rain had knocked into the gutter had clogged the drain, and the blood backed into the shop. Our soles clung to the blood and the blood to the floor and that morning we had used the last of the sawdust.

Now even the sharpest knives weren't fast enough.

WHAT TO EXPECT

I've been known to knock off early,
wad the cellophane and squeeze out the blood,
then shake it like a handkerchief
and dab the corners of my eyes.
Oh, I can be that way.

I'm gravy,
but the floor scorched.
I shave Brown Mule with a pocketknife.
I spit on the playground.

This is translated from the Hillbilly.
But it keeps pretty near its hole.
I cut the tongues out of worn boots
to splice the reaper belt.

My people are bad to tell too much
of what don't explain a damn thing.
Every rooster has its own old oil barrel.
Paydays, we gather around the one
of two things those birds know to do.

PAST DUE

I'm paying my light bill and need
twelve cents, and I think I feel it
in the pocket of my new
khakis that just this morning
I slid from their mailing pouch
and put on, still cold from their night under the porch light.
What I find
is a slip of paper with the name "Marilyn"
typed on it. "That's my mother's name,"
I say to the woman behind
the power company's customer counter.
I'm paying my light bill and need
to forget that my mother's name was waiting
in my new pocket.
"She inspected it," says the power company woman.

I see my mother holding up my pants,
looking them over in the light from a window
because her house, the old homeplace, had no lights
or no inside lights other than what people could carry.
I'm paying my light bill and need
to put away this ticket
that has permitted me to enter the movie
in which my mother is inspecting my pants
before she folds them
and slips her name, which proclaims
the work of her eyes, into the cool pocket.
The house she was born in,
the house with no lights of its own,
is now under the lake,
the lake this company backed up
to hold the power,
the power of water that becomes light,
for which I am, by unspoken agreement, accountable.

CHILD REARING

He stood in the doorway
absently gazing
into the room: she had left
the doll with its head on
the pillow, the sheet
drawn neatly up over its face.
At last he went to work.
The morning light stood in the doorway.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

One eventual ghost,
one in a long line

extending back
to an unthinkable origin,

just like anyone
I've ever met, or cared for, ever

laid eyes on, been glanced at
or spoken to by,

touched by,
been struck by

or struck — or with an endless longing and tenderness

touched, forgot the name
and never saw again.

FIRST LIGHT

It's raining
in a dead language.

The empty house filled with the sound

of your name
abruptly whispered,

once,

before you finally slept.

FIRST DAY ON THE WARD

A blizzard. I can't see
a single person on the street.
I know they're out there, though: the fittest
reading the paper and drinking their coffee,
the winter light filling the rooms where they sit
unaghast.

It's Monday in the world,
and time to go —

I've unpacked and have nothing to do
but lie down and stare at the snow.
Which is something I am good at;
something I enjoy.
Probably I'll die like this,
a long time ago.

A CHAIR BY THE FIRE

If there had been a flash fire,
that afternoon, would my parents have first
untied me, and then carried me out,
or grabbed the chair and carried it out
with me tied to it? It would have looked
odd on the sidewalk, two adults and two freestanding
children, and a child softly affixed,
a secret grandmother of the house. They did not
know how else to stop me from pouring
ink on their bed, they thought I was a little
possessed. And I do look weird, eight years
old and bound, like a nursing-home drooler,
as if the device on my backside is a kind of
walker, an anti-walker. If they had gone
out, and a flash fire had come,
I could have simply stood up, bent forward
at a right angle, wrists at hips,
formal bow of an abject subject,
an object relation, and titupped down the stairs.
That could have been done without a fire,
I could have swung against a wall
and dislodged my maple saddle, but I sat
obedient. And I almost remember
the touch of matter, for those hours, wooden
touch. If there had been a fire
that day, besides the tiny one
which gutted a back closet in my heart,
I could have done a Joan of Arc,
or been carried — tipped, here and there,
with small flames, like a late maple,
winter coming — out onto the walk
and been seen by the neighbors, Mrs. Langmaid,
Mrs. McGlenaghan, Judge MacBain —
and I might have felt like a child who had never been
allowed outside, now looking around

through my own eyes, as who I was,
seeing the curb, and the sidewalk, and the path
to the front door, and the pillar of magma
where that home had been.

LIFELONG

When I think of your tail-bone, the tart sweetness,
of its skin, &, in the bone, the marrow,
the packed quartz crystals of Northern
rock, glimmering, after the glacier,
I think of how we travel easily
into each other, it is where we go
at night. There is ocean, sky, granite,
there is your father, dead, curled on his side,
mouth open, lips cracked,
and my father, his jaw at the same grim
angle of a salt-cod, and their seed
is there, too. I do not know
where the mothers are, maybe the mothers
are elsewhere, and I can be the only
woman for a while, and love the entire
human in the man. Smooth and planished
under the stars, your tail-bone at night almost
phosphors — I touch it as we dive, as if through a
cold and unlighted Atlantic, bands
of seed rich as krill in the water,
down to the floor of our life together, and the
door that opens in that floor, and stands open, and we dive.

THE FOETUS IN THE VOTING BOOTH

When I swung the lever over, and the curtain
slammed shut, and I looked up,
there it was, tiny, oval,
like a flat cocoon spun above the levers,
as if I were not the only living
thing, in there. For a moment, I felt I could
almost understand following
the leader of the embryo,
its huge, unvarious head, its messy
beauty, the meteor-tail of its body,
its rushing in place, I could almost take it
for my god. But to make
others take it —
to sacrifice them to it . . . It looked archaic,
its markings like a Pandora sphinx
or a death's-head moth. As I glanced from candidate
to candidate, in the corner of my eye the foetus
looked like an eye with an uneven iris,
and its gaze seemed to be following me —
I thought that I was supposed to be
alone in the booth, the way a woman
is supposed to be alone with her body.
She does not have to give it to anyone, anymore,
not even a child of her own conceiving.
A man has gone up the road of the air
and walked on the moon. A woman has gone
up the passage of her body to the rosy
attic of the womb, with her whisk-broom,
weeping or singing — no larvum, no intricate
orb-web, no chrysalis
but she decides.

HIS AND HERS

The gentle, curvy tendrils of wisteria won't
make leaves until I tie them to the post.
What's waiting worth? Thinking can live there:
smoke in the mind before the cigarette's lit,
thought of wetness making wet
or not; thought might nod in waves
unattached, unattached, as with the half-fear
in reading so often how he hurts her,
how she hurts him, seeing it on a screen,
light opening a room with no one in it
yet. So, when the half-pink, papery, spent body
of the bougainvillea flower was let go and hit me
I was made ready and knew to make my fear noise.

EXPULSION AND ANNUNCIATION

Holding the fruit against her ribs, she looks despondent.
He isn't touching her. Let's untie that twine of her fingers
from the model of charity. We have the chirp
of crickets in December in the south. Do you think
or is there a ceiling under which the heavens roll?
Above the depth and breadth and height of her desire
there was only more desire, his three fingers
and her body moving on them. Here and now, it's only
thinking moving on thought, trill and chirp
into which enters one dog's ecstatic, cone-shaped
bark, like thought put into you.

BLESSING THE THROAT

Something put is not the same as something
brought. This is what happened: the two candles
in his hand were crossed, unlit; this was their
other use. He narrowed them, limb-like, and she felt one
slide on each side of her neck. The wick ends opened two
places in her hair. His free hand moved
the air above her head. Something was said
by him. Could it be from this
that, often and privately, it seems
objects concern her? Rocks heavy in the patio floor,
place where the live oak divides itself, birds immediate
and temporary or just the color of birds sharp or soft . . .
This also happened: when the two who wanted to be lovers
denied themselves, he was standing next to her. She was
sitting on a chair. When she saw that he was watching her
mouth only,
something was said by her. He held the bottle of water the
clumsy way,
by its bottom, and brought it to the one opening her body made
for them.

PERSON, PLACE, GESTURE, THING

1

Woman with a book unopened.
Place where the bleeding heart bloomed last year.
Her lighting a cigarette making him hard.
Stair step to trip on.

Man singing in his mind only.
Room closed on two asleep.
Heavy picture pulling on the nail.
Fork in a drawer.

2

His beautiful body, his brother's suicide.
Dark in one room, dark in the next.
Her laugh unwinding with the horse's whinnying.
Pine cones that crackle as if to each other.

Her face in the dream, the sumac reddening.
Under the bed, above the bed, under the house, above.
Staining the garment, staining the whole life.
Whole body of time.

3

Woman with a book unopened.
Man singing in his mind only.
His beautiful body, his brother's suicide.
Her face in the dream, the sumac reddening.

Place where the bleeding heart grew last year.
Room closed on two asleep.
Dark in one room, dark in the next.
Under the bed, above the bed, under the house, above.

Her lighting a cigarette making him hard.
Heavy picture pulling on the nail.

Her laugh unwinding with the horse's whinnying.
Staining the garment, staining the whole life.

Stair step to trip on.

Fork in a drawer.

Pine cones that crackle as if to each other.

Whole body of time.

WREN

The house wren had more beauty on a sad day.
Someone thought of himself as sitting without thinking.
He would have said neither was there feeling.
The feeder hung where he'd hung it,
and he'd filled it. Why be ashamed?
Moments that seemed not to make the morning
crossed the morning and he wondered
what he'd had before that thought occurred to him.
Less? A making-ready? Why would his mind
make arrangements toward a desire he didn't know?
The painted bird sprang down and ate,
random and consequential.

THE BABY RABBITS IN THE GARDEN

— Their mother laid them there
in grass and hair.
The tunnel fell,
the farmer's boot arrived
and put them out,
too poor to stay alive.

— And now the farmer too with his large white head
backwards or forwards by a belt is led
down the black hall
hungerless to bed

and soon will the reader too
my listening head
be laid to bed,
the tunnel fall . . .

THIN LIVESTOCK

Mounted on goats and rams
(even on roosters)
we will enter the city that used to be our city
(we'll be so light
that thin livestock will carry us easily)
we will advance along the strange streets
past entrances of abandoned houses
where we kissed on the doorsteps
strong kisses and sweet.
Long vanished coffee shops will flash
their pastries never-to-be-baked again,
their smell refusing to leave.
Through ordinary squares, and gardens
programmed with computerized drip systems,
we will move in a silly procession
insulting the good taste
of other generations,
even their sense of justice.

THE FOWL OF THE AIR

The paper boat was tossed in the puddle,
the lake filled with birds,
and a bird plucked off her redundant wings
tore off her beak and licked the blood
from her open wound, her newborn lips. At last,
she said, I've arrived. Smells of scorched grass,
leftover thorns, smoldering earth, a faint trickle
of water at body temperature. The pale glitter
through the haze is the sun, said the bird.
I'll get to work, there's a city to build
and a tower, heading for heaven.

WINDOW TO THE FUTURE

(from "Windows near Mallarmé")

In laced-up boots the 19th century
steps down from the carriage onto the stone pavement
covered with the fish market's mud.

Her hand holds a portable brass telescope
her pocket silver coins with the emperor's profile
and her heart the dream of flying like a bird.

On the syphilis ulcer a mousseline hankie
(in the distance the broken groan of a coal locomotive)
in the brain the roar of the chorus from *Antigone*.

Soon the hieroglyphic script will be deciphered
— ah, it's no use —
and dust from Mars will be heaped on a desk.

translated by Shirley Kaufman

POOR LITTLE DEVIL

He's a devil and his mother's a saint.
He laughs in church, cries over a crap game.
Batty schoolgirls bring him candy
Inside their sweatshirts.
Nipples smeared with licorice
For him to lick while his hairy tail
Brushes up against their bare legs.

Defenders of public decency
March and carry signs outside the museum
In which naked Christ hangs on the cross.
It's supposed to make you stop and think.
Indeed, one day walking around the old neighborhood,
You do finally stop and think

About the way they dress him in a new uniform
With gold buttons,
So he comes back to his mother
Smiling wistfully in the open coffin.
Poor little devil, the mourners say,
One by one opening their umbrellas
Against the inclement something, still to be named.

FREE THE GOLDFISH

A pet store window
With an aquarium
We pressed our noses against
Every night.

For light, the goldfish had
A single bulb
On a long naked wire
Tied into a noose.

They swam to and fro glancing
Over their shoulders
At the empty shelves,
The street with its dark shadows,

Its rows of parked cars
On which a few large snowflakes
Fell carefully
As if not to make a sound.

PLANTING RED MAPLE SAPLINGS

They seem more than "Dormant" Less? Yet
Their catalog calls them "Three-Year-Olds" Babies?

Thin dry sticks Smooth even the bumps
Black & brown & gray & tan & pink
Lowest section a weird orange tint

When I open the earth wide with my spade
Into a soft coffin of air
And pour shredded leaves humus clay
And a broth of watered muck about the roots

Gloves off to guide the tree better
I notice a thin black whip shadow
On the green lawn
Like an uncovered electric
Wire Shocking my stone cold hands Alive

PRECIOUS METAL

“ . . . though I spoke with the words of ‘the world,’ my gestures were the more important language of ‘my world.’ . . . Fascination for colored and shiny objects. Grasping the concept of beauty in simplicity. Also a tool for self-hypnosis, needed to help calm down and relax. Often closeness to particular people lives within these objects whether or not they were actually given by the other person. A particular color of blue . . ., a bright golden yellow button . . ., a piece of cut glass . . . ”

(Donna Williams, *Nobody Nowhere*)

On edges of door keys:
Tetons and fish flashings
 if you look at them;
perfect teeth, balky snarl
 if you use a new one.

She's the apparatus they all fit, a finder,
fascinated with fasteners,
 with shiny messengers
tripped from bicycles,
 charismatic mechanisms.

Each thing seems happy with
its sprung identity — flattered
 that for her to choose it
it must be obdurate alloy,
 no soft supple foil.

It's her brilliance
she's collecting:
 “I have two big jars of nuts and bolts.
My latest find, on the Interstate,
 an offset irregular screwdriver,

can get into a tight area.

You know what I've been using for center punches? —

spindle from an electric fan;
the center pin of a solenoid;
a mainshaft from a car —

it's splined at one end.

Old CB antennas make good little fetchers.

Dental tools:
they're good pulling up a wire."
Such gear must first

fall out of the sky, be kicked or thrown
or sprained apart. All must be left
to be alone, missed,
even berthed for good in the ground.
And the smell of metal —

always, to me, a disappointment,
like can-poisoned pineapple —
is essence enough to her,
inspiring its body. Each cool instrument,
attaching to others,

builds a mind across weather.
A bridge, a broadcast tower.
She doesn't feel the same
about found money:
It's nice but

it's not a real appliance,
not as personal as one.
You can't break it for use.
She has the mushroom-hunter's gift,
to be driving the speed limit

and spot a fraction of some device.
Eyeglasses' screws
 emit seeable light
at a distance. In my slow and easy walks
 I uncover the same

dead crow wing for months, or a swift
whipping lizard tail under thistles,
 and leave each there
to be naturally of use. Or I'll imagine
 a silver pine cone

with no reason to be.
Chrome rainwater in ditches is never,
 to me, a stretching tool.
But an old seer — in his radio repair shop —
 she met when she was twelve

showed her how to mend
and not to break. A good way to change
 your life, she says,
(and it's quicker, more certain
 than regeneration

for lizards or anything botanical)
is learning how to solder metal.
 With each gadget
she translates into being,
 my floral wisdom loses a petal.

Then, with new and mystic
trust in welding, gains it back.

for my daughter, Phoebe

DANCES

Right on stage
pulling, wrestling each
 other by shirtfront, manic,
the two puppeteers
adlib anger for the matinee

friends or relatives who came unprepared
 for human drama,
the smaller cardboard puppet stage
kicked flat,
shirtbuttons scuffed into squeals

underfoot — neither wants to be the puppet
 Godiva, neither wants
to be the hand,
all Stanislavsky, inside her.

* * * *

At once cleaning
himself with paper
 towels, his mind on call-waiting,
or maybe directed
by radio-signals, the retired cop's still law

to the storefront
where the legal poor are fed
 castoffs, where they chew
in synchronized groups like lab assistants

forced to eat test failures.
He's in blues
with insignia snipped off
 but sure he's not one of them —
like the woman he just wrestled

back to her alley,
her child around
his leg wading with them
to a dance tune the child can't stop

screaming, all three briefly
in step sliding
over polyurethane trays slimed shiny
with beef grease & noodle loops,
he jigsawing one arm

over her arm,
the loose earplug of his pocket
radio making a welt in her face.

CRABGRASS

poison or blowtorch
it — only a trace root

under the concrete, it will thread up,
the tiny sword leaves frill
into the walkway. You can scuff those leaves

off, my mother, 78, jokes — I'm too old
(she's in tongueless garden shoes)

to dance.

What else can I do but take her
knotty hand & we're lockarmed near
hibiscus & the field

roses she's knelt to clear of weeds,
stepping out
together *God's misspellings* she calls
the barely visible

focus of our inhibited polka, three
green crawlers, only crabgrass epithets,
three ur-flowers of the garden

walk, but survivors. This is how I want to die,
she gasps, her one arthritic foot
up, the other down in this design
the crabgrass persists

in making.

Pain is my unforgiving
partner, she says — let me catch my breath.

UNDER A SPELL

The shadow of people
in brightly lit windows,
fantastic silhouettes
when darkness starts outside.

Night comes on with other
eyes, another smell.
Doors stand open.
And without even trying

you listen to a voice,
alluring, bodiless:
it knows your name already
and you simply obey it,

follow through strange rooms,
sense: someone's looking at you.
You've always known about him,
keep following, under the spell,

who's been waiting for you oh
so long: he's been desiring
you for a long long time. —
Whoever's slept with him

has written everything down.
Once more your life
like your love passes by
and with it what's left of him.
You're free of everything now.

JULY

July's smell of fire. Scorched grass:
hot and dry.
Your face by mine —
how people see us for a moment,
oh, they say, turn away quickly.
We grow lighter and lighter:
one of us rising over the other's body.
Everything's hesitant, accidental now.
The grass burned and burned
our lips, the skin cracked.
The sparkle of a glance
before it lowers.
It's always been like that.
Burned to the vocal chords.
Three times, a quick *yes* —
brutal month
and a garment briefly opened.
Hesitating, by chance, you comply.

ALMOST NOTHING

I was gazing by chance at the moon,
the way it went behind a cloud,
thinking nothing all the while
on just an evening
with westwind, I happened to be alone
in the garden, which was abloom, and
it was no accident that it came down
to peonies, rhododendron, yellow iris,
a logical blossoming,
the logic of the season.
Chance demands the logical —
hence this blossoming, alone,
and the moon behind a cloud by chance —
had a sort of innocence,
the way there are happy moments
when almost nothing happens.

translated by Stuart Frieibert

KEATS IN BURNS COUNTRY

It isn't so much that Burns, like the best,
dies young, nor that he's buried among
Lowlanders, at the Borders, nor that in
eighteen eighteen, Scotland, in spite of its
beauty, is still black granite country, nor that
the Kirk is presbyterian stone
over the soul, nor that the poverty
of the dirt farmer, which Burns was and was
poorly, is medieval, nor even that
his widow survives and haunts the churchyard —
it isn't these hostilities nor those
you can imagine so much as the fact
of Burns alive in failure, with only
words on paper to compensate his death.

Tom is alive in Hampstead hanging on,
younger than both of you will ever be
again. Scotland's your epic journey
to the clouds and to the pillars under
them, yet mostly it's been a ragtag walk
between the towns' consumptive rain and chil-
blain wind, summer but an hour's paly gleam.
You think that Burns' white marble tomb's on scale
though nothing of the spirit of the man
nor the half perfect heartbreak of the poems.
You write two cottage sonnets on the spot,
the first for Tom, the second for yourself,
one at the grave, the other at the house
Burns was born in — you can't make your mind up

how you feel and what is true. All is cold
Beauty, pain is never done: then you toast
to Burns your own frail mortal body and
the thousand days you say you still have left.
This is your first warm taste of whiskey, your

first real taste of the barley-bree of fame.
Outside the birthplace windows the bright fields
run to yellow then to shade then open
north to the bedrock-covering of mountains.
Burns worked and walked here, you are thinking,
and talked with Bitches and drank with Blackguards,
the intimate sublime of what he wrote.
You're failing too and by the time you climb
the snow cloud of Ben Nevis you'll be dead.

TOURIST

I. The Burning

River, and there is no water in it. There is the channel rushing
water made, one bridge, two shores. Before I see what's burning

I see the burning.

Something turning

unfamiliar. I was walking to the river
to cross it. The river as the thing to cross.

And in the river,

nothing rushing nothing taking nowhere gone.

And that

was the river, I walk closer.

Wood stacked crosswise in the tsk tsk of cross purposes.

Burning straw is brought to light it, the straw tucked around the

body catches, passes it,

like relay runners their fierce baton.

And I know it's real because I happen on it. I am incidental,
happening on.

On my shore

a man is circling the body, keening, running the erratic
planet of him and then the ever

narrowing circumference of his grief.

Wood smolders and smoke gathers

in the lungs of those who'd come to mourn.

Fire burns the body into clarity.

The head throws off its caul, someone has taken
leave of itself, two bright feet.

There are two sides to everything.

Then again there is the river.

And the others sit apart, casually because it wants to be
a celebration. Someone is turning orange and yellow.

But the one who is circling, he is

thickening around their necks, he is the neck,
he is the blazing necklace of grief.

II. The Circus

Still, it's the same, the likely and the unlikely,
whether she can hold the quivering hole her rope draws in
the air — she does not care.

If I thought I came to see them balance,
I stayed to see if they would fall,
where the show failed, where it would show itself as show.
Couples juggle first plates then chairs then flaming candles.
I reaffirm the pattern by looking for the error,
the gesture uncompleted,
the *amiss*.

Two bodies balanced head to head trade impossible postures
for applause. Their faces insist it hurts.

What do I know? The ground under my feet?

My chair is hard.

The girl whose swirling rope will not spin wide enough for her
to enter

the turning circle of it lets drop the whole,
gives back one burning look and goes.

The lights are bright but not right here.

I sit up close.

I visit the bottoms of the aerialist's feet.

LIVES OF THE ARTISTS

1.

Learn how to model before you learn to finish things,
Michelangelo hisses . . .

Before you bear witness,
Be sure you have something that calls for a witnessing,
I might add —
Don't gloss what isn't assignable or brought to bear,
Don't shine what's expendable.

March in the northern south. Hard ides-heat
Bangs through the branches of winter trees,
thumps the gauges
Needling green and immodestly
Out of the dead leaves, out of their opium half-dreams.
Willows, medusa-hooded and bone-browed, begin to swim up
Through their brown depths, wasps revive
and plants practice their scales.

In Poussin's apocalypse,
we're all merely emanations sent forth
From landscape's hell-hung heart-screen —
Some flee through the dust, some find them a bed in the wind's
scorched mouth,
Some disappear in flame . . .

As I do this afternoon
Under the little fires in the plum tree, white-into-white-into-
white,
Unidentified bird on a limb, lung-light not of this world.

2.

When you have died there will be nothing —

No memory of you will remain,
not even a trace as you walk
Aimlessly, unseen, in the fitful halls of the dead,
Sappho warns us. She also writes:
The moon has set, and the Pleiades —
in the deep middle of the night
The time is passing . . .

How is it that no one remembers this?
Time's ashes, *I lie alone.*
So simple, so simple, so unlike the plastic ticking Christ
Who preyed on us we prayed to —
Such eucharistic side-bars, such saint-shortened anomalies
Under the dull stained glass,
down the two-lane and four-lane highways.
Pain enters me drop by drop.

The two plum trees, like tired angels, have *dropped their wings at*
their sides.
I walk quietly among the autumn offerings
Dark hands from the underworld
Push up around me,
gold-amber cups
And bittersweet, nightshade, indulgences from the dead.
I walk quietly and carefully on their altar,
among their prayers.

3.

We all rise, if we rise at all, to what we're drawn by,
Big Smoke, simplicity's signature,
Last untranslatable text —
The faithful do not speak many words . . .
What's there to say,
Little smoke, cloud-smoke, in the plum trees,

Something's name indecipherable
rechalked in the scrawled branches.

Everything God possesses, it's been said, the wise man already has.

Some slack, then, some hope.

Don't give the word to everyone,

The gift is tiny, the world made up

Of deceivers and those who are deceived —

The true word

Is the word about the word.

Celestial gossip, celestial similes

(Like, like, like, like, like)

Powder the plum blossoms nervously, invisibly,

the word

In hiding, unstirred. The facts,

The bits of narrative,

glow, intermittent and flaked.

The sins of the uninformed are the first shame of their teachers.

4.

Jaundicing down from their purity, the plum blossoms

Snowfall out of the two trees

And spread like a sheet of mayflies

soundlessly, thick underfoot —

I am the silence that is incomprehensible,

First snow stars drifting down from the sky,

late fall in the other world;

I am the utterance of my name.

Belief in transcendence,

belief in something beyond belief.

Is what the blossoms solidify

In their fall through the two worlds —

The imaging of the invisible, the slow dream of metaphor,

Sanction our going up and our going down, our days
And the lives we infold inside them,
our *yes* and *yes*.

Good to get that said, tongue of cold air
Licking the landscape,
snuffing the flame in the green fuse.

I am the speech that cannot be grasped.
I am the substance and the thing that has no substance,
Cast forth upon the face of the earth,
Whose margins we write in,
whose one story we tell, and keep on telling.

5.

There's nothing out there but light,
the would-be artist said,
As usual just half right:
There's also a touch of darkness, everyone knows, on both sides
of both horizons,
Prescribed and unpaintable,
Touching our fingertips whichever way we decide to jump.
His small palette, however, won't hold that color,
though some have, and some still do.

The two plum trees know nothing of that,
Having come to their green grief,
their terrestrial touch-and-go,
Out of grace and radiance,
Their altered bodies alteration transmogrified.
Mine is a brief voice, a still, brief voice
Unsubject to change or the will to change —
might it be restrung and rearranged.

But that is another story.
Vasari tells us

An earlier tale than Greek of the invention of painting,
How Gyges of Lydia
Once saw his own shadow cast

by the light of a fire

And instantly drew his own outline on the wall with charcoal . . .
Learn to model before you learn how to finish things.

CONTRIBUTORS

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ELLEN DORÉ WATSON will have her chapbook, **Broken Railings**, winner of the Green Lake Chapbook Prize, published by Owl Creek Press early in 1996. She has published many volumes of Brazilian poetry and prose in English translation, including the work of Adelia Prado (**The Alphabet in the Park**, Wesleyan, 1990).

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THOMAS LUX's latest book is **Split Horizon** (Houghton Mifflin). A regular member of the writing faculty at Sarah Lawrence, he is teaching this fall at UC Irvine. Adastra Press will bring out his early selected poems, **Handgrenade/Glassblower**, next year, and the following year will see his **Selected and New Poems, 1975-1995**, again from Houghton Mifflin.

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DENNIS SCHMITZ inaugurated our Poetry Series with **About Night: Selected and New Poems**. He teaches at Sacramento State.

CHARLES SIMIC's new book of poems is **A Wedding in Hell**, from Harcourt Brace.

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CHARLES WRIGHT's new book of poems, **Chickamauga** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), appeared last spring. Oberlin College Press has just published a collection of writings on his work, **The Point Where All Things Meet**, edited by Tom Andrews.

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